

OLDER ADULTS AT RISK FOR FIRE DEATH AND INJURY

Older adults are the fastest growing age group of the American population and are also one of the groups at highest risk for fire deaths. Based on 1995-1999 annual averages, adults 65 and older also face a risk twice the average, while people 85 and older have a risk that is four-and-a-half times more than average, according to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). Examining the problem further, data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System reports that two-thirds of fire deaths in the elderly occur when the victim is sleeping or trying to escape, which reinforces the need to stress the importance of preparing and practicing an escape plan, and adjusting that plan to take into consideration the physical capabilities of older adults. During 2005, over one-third of the fire fatalities that occurred were people over 60.

Older adults may have decreased mobility and other health issues that would prohibit a quick response during a fire emergency. Many older adults take multiple medications that could lead to a slower response or confusion, altering the decision-making process. The impairments caused by the combination of alcohol and prescription drugs in older adults can further impede judgment and escape. Such impairments may also lead to an increased likelihood of accidentally starting a fire and not detecting a fire in its early stages.

“Often, help from a family member, caregiver or neighbor may be required to assist an older adult in safely exiting the home. Addressing these issues before the fire occurs is essential,” says Ray Lambert, North Dakota State Fire Marshal. While developing a fire safety plan for older adults, heeding the following advice from the United States Fire Administration is recommended.

INSTALL AND MAINTAIN SMOKE ALARMS

- Make sure smoke alarms are installed on each level of your home and outside all sleeping areas. A smoke alarm should also be placed in each room used for sleeping.
 - Smoke alarms with a vibrating pad or flashing light are available for the deaf or hard of hearing
 - Smoke alarms with a strobe light outside the house to catch the attention of neighbors and emergency call systems for summoning help are also available
- Test them monthly and replace the batteries at least once a year.
- Caregivers are encouraged to check the smoke alarms of those who are unable to do it themselves. The chances of surviving a home fire almost doubles with the initial warning from a smoke alarm.

PLAN YOUR ESCAPE

Planning fire escape plans around one's capabilities is a key element to fire safety!

- Be familiar with all exits from every room and from the dwelling.
- If you use a walker or wheelchair, check all exits to be sure they can go through the doorways.
- Make any necessary accommodations, such as providing exit ramps and widening doorways to facilitate an emergency escape.
- Unless instructed by the fire department, never use an elevator during a fire.

DON'T ISOLATE YOURSELF

- Speak to your family members, building manager, or neighbors about your fire safety plan and practice it with them.
- Contact your local fire department's non-emergency line and explain your special needs.

- The fire department will probably suggest escape plan ideas and may perform a home fire safety inspection and offer suggestions about smoke alarm placement and maintenance.
- Ask emergency providers to keep your special needs information on file.

LIVE NEAR AN EXIT

- Although you have the legal right to live where you choose, you'll be safest on the ground floor if you live in an apartment building.
- If you live in a multi-story home, arrange to sleep on the ground floor and near an exit.

BE FIRE-SAFE AROUND THE HOME

The leading cause of residential fire deaths among older adults is careless smoking.

- If you must smoke, never smoke in bed or near an oxygen source, gas stove, or other flammable object.
- When cooking, never approach an open flame while wearing loose clothing and don't leave cooking unattended. Use a timer to remind you of food in the oven.
- Don't overload electrical outlets or extension cords.
- Never use the oven to heat your home. Properly maintain chimneys and space heaters.
- Take special precaution if you are on medication that makes you drowsy.

"Fire Safety is everyone's responsibility. Taking advantage of modern technology by installing a residential sprinkler system is an option worth exploring, especially for people with mobility issues," adds Lambert.